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Environmental debate and power crisis

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Environmentalists claim that the main cause for the prevailing 'black outs' is the lack of a national plan for power generation and the CEB's arrogance.

Suranjan Kodithuwakku of the Green Movement of Sri Lanka said that the CEB has to be responsible for the present power crisis as they do not have a risk management system and they do what they want without paying heed to expert opinion.

"Transmission loss in the system is 21 percent which in other countries is eight percent", he said. "Why cannot they take steps to reduce it? The CEB keep their 'defaults' under the carpet and point the finger towards us".

According to him the country can yet save 50 percent of electricity if the government with the help of the public start saving electricity by reducing the daily consumption until the reservoirs recover the required water levels. "We are experiencing 12 and half hours of day light and we do not need to use electricity during day, like in other countries.

If all the state and private sector institutions stop using ACs, fans and lighting blubs to some extent and stop live television programs and radio programs which consume much electricity, we can save a considerable amount of electricity", Kodithuwakku pointed out.

He also claims that the CEB had constructed a bungalow for its Chairman at a cost of Rs. 50 million which was the amount needed for constructing 10 small scale hydro power projects.

Hemantha Witanage, Executive Director of the Environmental Foundation Ltd. (EFL) said that 455 MW of thermal power scheduled to be added to the national grid had not been added due to various loopholes in tender procedures. Break downs of gas turbines in certain power generation plants has added to the crisis. "Eco groups were the first to bring these stories of break downs of turbines to limelight and at that time the CEB tried to hide them", he said.

"The 150 MW power project at Kelanitissa funded by the OECS Japan scheduled to be commissioned in 1999 but still it has not

been commissioned due to delay in tender procedures. Another 150 MW power project scheduled to be commissioned in 2000 is still not generating due to problems in tender procedures. 115 MW Combined Cycle Power Plant also at Kelanitissa installed in 1999, which runs on 'Naphtha' is not generating power since last August due to the breakdown of turbine, he pointed out.

"Therefore, the prevailing power cuts are not the result of delays in constructing the Upper Kotmale, which is six years behind the schedule, and Norochcholai Phase I which is scheduled to be completed in 2003", Witanage added.

According to him another cause is silting of the two main reservoirs - Kotmale and Victoria. "Forty percent of the Kotmale reservoir has been silted and Victoria by 25 percent. This has reduced the water storage capacity of the reservoirs and if the authorities had taken steps to remove the silt earlier, we would not have to experience this problem today", he said.

Witanage said that EFL strongly opposed the Upper Kotmale Hydro Power Project and the Coal Power Project at Norochcholai because of the wrong site selection, the technology and the terrorist threat in the area.

"We oppose such projects with reason, but no one can say that environmentalists were against every project that generates power," Witanage said.

On diesel power generation Witanage said that from the beginning EFL and the other eco groups were against installing diesel power projects. "Because it is more costly and pollute the environment. Diesel power plants will emit thousand tonnes of sulphur", he said adding that the Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) is more efficient power generator than the coal. "The ADB technical assistance group explore the possibility of LNG here in Sri Lanka and recommended it as a suitable energy generator. A unit will be Rs. 5.50", he said.

Though the CEB authorities boast that the coal power is the cheapest, saying that a unit generated from coal is only Rs. 3.50, with the cost for coal transportation and transmission cost, it will be more than Rs. 7. CEB is mis-leading the public, Witanage claimed.